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ABSTRACT

In an effort to actively engage students in writing and introduce them to more rigorous texts and assignments, the first-year literature/composition course at Nassau Community College (New York) was modified. The primary change consisted of the teacher participating in all classroom and take-home writing assignments. In addition, texts by authors such as Ovid, Shakespeare, and Kafka were used in place of contemporary poems and short stories. Writing assignments consisted of in-class freewriting, rewriting stories, comparison papers, and a research paper. The teacher participated in all activities and provided samples to help students. Freewriting exercises by both the teacher and students were read aloud, and students were encouraged to share with the class any ideas or questions that arose. The retelling of stories was used to encourage creativity as well as provide a subject for comparison papers. Students received their teacher's models first and then wrote their own retelling of a story with the teacher's model to be used as a writing aid. Research papers were also assigned, where students received a sample paper and then found their own topic, sought out the answer, and integrated their research into an essay. Few students seemed to have difficulties with documentation, and most students attempted to incorporate different styles of writing in their papers. At the end of the course, students expressed overall enthusiasm toward the paper examples provided by the teacher, saying that the papers guided and motivated them. (WJT)

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Writing With and For Students

Bernice W. Kliman—Nassau Community College

Recently, I changed my version of English 102, which is both an Introduction to Literature and the second half of Freshman Composition, and made myself into a happier teacher. As the director of a FIPSE-funded[1] faculty development project that focuses on ways to make students active learners, I have been especially intent on discovering ways to engage my students, to encourage them to use writing as a way of thinking, to discover the literature within themselves, as well as to give them the means to analyze literature in the conventional ways that will be expected of them in sophomore courses in literature. I have found that I can best accomplish these goals when I demonstrate that *I* am engaged, and that *I* use writing as a way of thinking.

But there is more to the project than active engagement. A twin goal is to introduce or re-introduce rigorous texts and to design tasks for students that will empower them to grasp more demanding work.

In my English 102 course I have recently begun using classical texts—rather than the anthology of short contemporary poems and very short stories that I had descended to out of a sense of despair about students' ability to read difficult literature. Last year I designed my course around the theme of change. We worked with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*; several chapters from the King James Bible, from Genesis and Ecclesiastes; *Gawain and the Green Knight*; Kafka's *Metamorphosis;* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Part of the way I can help students with these more demanding texts is by writing with and for them. I freewrite with my students in class, and I complete virtually all the at-home

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[1]Nassau Community College has a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, 1987-1990, called "Improving Undergraduate Education Through Literacy-Intensive Courses Developed in Faculty Seminars.'

assignments. Because I do the writing, I have a constant check on the feasibility of assignments, and I can guide my students to achieve good results. Writing also allows me to struggle for answers to the questions I pose about the literature I am reading with my students, which very often isn't the literature of my primary professional interest and which I would never, in the ordinary scheme of things, write about at all in a *public* way. Thus, writing both in and out of the classroom gives me opportunities to display my own desire to learn through writing and also to set before them models that can help them to write. Writing with my students, I can be what Paulo Freire describes, that is, the teacher/learner, while they can be the learner/teacher (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 67).

First comes freewriting. When it's done in class, we often read aloud all around. Even before the results are shared, my *act* of writing is teaching students: As I bend intently over my paper, I show them how to respond to a call to write, for one of my goals is to enable them to write fully and freely whenever asked to do so. Our freewriting can bring to light ideas that might otherwise never come up. I am often amazed and delighted when the issues most important to me are the very ones that students raise in their freewriting. This result gives me a tremendous feeling of satisfaction about students. And when I feel good about them, I am a much happier teacher. Before this shared writing and reading aloud, I might have felt constrained to lead a discussion, with preconceived ideas about what should arise—and thus with leading questions. Now I can feel more confident about the ideas that come directly from our writing. For example, one student's freewriting early on in the semester asked the question that became the essential question for the course: "Why do people retell stories? Her tone was somewhat annoyed, but for me it was an interesting question, that is, one worth investigating. I put it on the board as a "question of honor"—I honor good sentences and good questions by publishing them in this way—and the question became a focal point for the course from then on.

The question fits very well the theme of *change*, for certainly every retelling involves change, and all the works we were reading embody retelling, in some form or other.

For at-home writing, I have used, mainly, aside from freewriting, two writing structures suggested by Ponsot and Deen in their book *Beat Not the Poor Desk*. These both involve comparison: one is called "Once I was; now I am," which is a rich structure for writing at many levels. The second structure, however, is the one I wish to concentrate on, because my writing within this structure was generative both for me and for the students. The structure, and I paraphrase, is: "It could be done this way, or it could be done this other way, and this is the difference it makes." It's a perfect structure for retellings and for comparison of retellings to originals.

In all literature, the writer might have told the story many ways but chose one particular way—and that choice makes the story what it is. The choices become clear to my students only through comparison, because otherwise they see any one story as itself only, a creation that has little to do with antecedents and nothing to do with choice. If they think of it at all, their view is that Kafka begins his story the way he does because that's the way the story begins. In a sense, this is true, but I want them to think another way, a way that foregrounds choice, so that they see that *their* writing is a matter of choices as well, and that one can play with choices—which is what revision is, a playing with choices.

I had students retell Ovid's story of Daphne and Apollo, which they had read in a translation by Humphries. Then, in a separate paper, students compared their story to the original to see how the difference in choices (theirs and Ovid/Humphries') affected the story. Before the first paper was due, I wrote two versions of the story of Daphne and Apollo, which I distributed to the class. One of my retellings was in the form of a letter from Daphne to her mother, and another was a dialogue between Cupid and Venus. I chose these unusual forms because one of my aims is to broaden students' definition of an essay. My model here is a textbook by Robert Scholes written some years ago which contains just five expository essays in four different modes—argument, drama, narrative, and lyric. I did not discuss my papers in class, but simply distributed them. My research question (research here defined as an inquiry into classroom practices)was, "Would my models be sufficient to show students how to retell a

story?" It seemed they *were* sufficient. Many students followed my example and wrote letters or dialogues while others rewrote the story in conventional story form but from a narrative point of view different from the original's, with details deleted, added and modified. My sense of things is that most students felt comfortable about the assignment because there were models to follow, and the fact that I had done *two* versions suggested that the assignment didn't have limits, that there are as many ways to retell the story as there are purposes in retelling. I might have, I think, used student papers and gotten the same results, and now that I have some of these I may do that in the future. Still, I have the impression that the teacher's two papers have more of an impact, and it doesn't strike me that they intimidate students, maybe because I display as honest an appreciation of *their* papers as I do of mine. I model for them the feeling of pleasure that one can have in one's own paper, even while it's still in a provisional state. And I model for them the feeling of pleasure that one can have in someone else's paper. And truly, I do enjoy hearing and reading their papers.

Since students' retellings are invariably much better than their analyses in the comparison papers, it's worthwhile to assign the task of retelling and comparing twice so that students can begin to develop some skill. Thus, for two other papers, they retold the Abraham and Isaac story and then compared theirs to the original.

I have learned that though it seems to be sufficient to simply *show* students my retellings and assign them the job of retelling, I had to do more than show them my comparison and say "Compare your retelling to the original." They needed some questions to guide them. Directing them to consider plot, setting, character and style, terms we had worked with, helped them to recognize the significance of these four areas of choice. Even when plot remains the same, for example, the retelling can be drastically different from the original. They begin to see the significance of language, structure, and details in determining a story's effects.

In addition to the freewriting and essay assignments, I also write the research papers with my students. These are microtermpapers, which reflect, in miniature, every single act that one in our discipline might do in writing a research paper. Students must **ask** a factual question,

speculate on the significance of various answers, then **search** out the answer. They must then **select** only that information relevant to the question and **integrate** the information into the essay that **asserts** the answer to the question and shows the significance of the answer. Finally they must **document** the source appropriately. Wonderful papers that do primary research with full integrity can be written sometimes within a half page.

Often, students who have been used to writing papers limited to surveying secondary sources, usually on assigned topics, do not know how to ask a question for research or how to follow any of the other procedures. Nobody has ever told them that research is a joy, that it's akin to sleuthing. Here above all, they need both the example of my enthusiasm and also models to follow.

I incorporated my own micro-research papers into my comparison papers. The idea of integrating research into a much larger whole, the idea of interpretive writing supported by research at various points, is very strange to my students. Yet this is what research for literary interpretation means to me and to many of my colleagues. Again, my example alone was not sufficient. Attractive as it might have been for them to combine two papers into one, virtually every student chose to write a *separate* microtermpaper. Yet they did follow my instructions. I had told them that their research should comprise roughly 10% of their microtermpapers and their assertions and discussion of the significance of their assertions for understanding the work of literature should comprise about 90%.

One thing I definitely have noticed this year: With my model research papers, very few students had difficulty with documentation (i.e., with footnotes and bibliographies). I spent no time in class on it at all, consulting individually with the few who didn't understand how to proceed with their particular sources—which might be oral sources or other unusual sources. For example, one student discovered by sharing Kafka's description of Gregor with an entomologist that Gregor Samsa must be a beetle, and that all insects have the curious sensitive spot, surrounded by dots, that Kafka refers to. It fascinated the student to realize that Kafka must have studied a beetle carefully to write the details, and he realized too that Kafka

selected only those beetle-details that he wanted. Learning how to document non-print sources is just one aspect; more important, the students have learned to query non-print sources.

In addition to ease with documentation, it seems that because several of my papers included dialogue, many more students used dialogue as a part of their essays than ever before, and their dialogue format correctly followed one of the two formats my models provided. Yet I spent almost no time at all in class on writing dialogue—only to remark that, by looking at examples of dialogue, they could extrapolate all the rules they might need, and I spent perhaps ten minutes demonstrating how one could do this.

I enjoyed writing my papers on Ovid and on Abraham and Isaac very much. As I wrote I realized again that I learned what I wanted to say only through writing, that the writing generated the ideas. I see this realization happening to some of my students as well, overhear them talking to each other about how ideas emerge that weren't there before the writing began. And we begin talking together like writers who share—and are excited by—the same processes.

To conclude, then: As I conceive teaching, in the classroom we are all in it together, all questioning, exploring, learning what we think by trying to make sense, through writing and talking, of our initial emotional responses. If I have no urge to write what I assign, I am sure something is wrong with the assignment. If I have no wish to write, how can I expect that my students, who are much less committed to writing than I am, will want to write, will be engaged by the process of discovery and reflection? By devising writing tasks that provide levers into the demanding works of the course, I hope to elicit both intellectual and emotional responses from all my students, at every level of ability. By enthusiastically sharing those writing tasks with them—from freewriting, to essays, to research—I point the way. I do not serve up my work as complete or as the final word; rather, as work-in-progress, work that can be affected by their discoveries, just as their work can be affected by mine.

In response to my query on my exit questionnaire—which I separated from the grading process by having it completed after grades were submitted—about whether my papers were helpful to them, all were enthusiastic. Only one person had a reservation, saying that my

papers might stifle creativity. My papers, several said, told them what I wanted, and knowing that made them feel secure. One said that my models "cleared up questions about how to do" assignments. Another student said that my papers "were motivating because they showed how strongly you were motivated and how much you enjoyed the subject matter." To guide them, to motivate them—these were two of my aims in writing papers with and for students; their writing, I believe, showed that my writing helps theirs.

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